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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4519
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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2196
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2767
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001509

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: CATHOLIC PRIESTS' VILLAGE VISITS
COULD JEOPARDIZE REGISTRATION ATTEMPTS IN THE FUTURE

REF: ASHGABAT 0289

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Richard Miles for reasons 1.4 (B)
and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Father Andrzej Madej, Charg at the Vatican Embassy and head of the local unregistered parish that operates under the auspices of the Embassy, asked a group of missionary friends in the U.S., Germany, and Slovakia to assist him during the absence of his assistant priest. The Amcit who responded to his call is an 81-year-old priest with a long history as a leader in the U.S. Catholic Charismatic movement and in worldwide evangelization. The group held meetings and preached for a week -- not only at church, but in one poor village outside of Ashgabat. Post has also learned that if a young man from Turkmenbashi continues his theological studies and becomes a priest, he may be the Catholic Church's best hope for registration, since Turkmen law requires that the local head of any religious organization that wants to be registered be a Turkmen citizen. However, he is likely to be ordained, at the earliest, in 2016. Risky home visits to the poor that the priests make to one village, however, could jeopardize registration hopes. END SUMMARY.

DOWN ONE PRIEST, SO CALL IN THE TROOPS

12. (C) Father Andrzej Madej has served as head of the Apostolic Nunciature in Ashgabat since 1997, and Father Thomas Kosciński arrived as his deputy several years later. Father Thomas recently left for Poland for his second back operation in the past 12 months. Following Father Andrzej's request to his missionary contacts in Europe and the United States to come to Turkmenistan at their earliest convenience for help and support, a team of them spent November 13-20 in Ashgabat, holding meetings and preaching. They include:

-- An 81 year old Amcit priest who became involved in the Catholic "Charismatic Renewal" movement in the early 1970's. He worked both in the U.S. and overseas in his capacity as director of the International Office for Catholic Charismatic Renewal in 1978. He has traveled to and spoken in over 100 countries, has organized retreats for a group of priests from around in the world that took place in the Vatican, and worked in the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy. He also

founded and was director of Evangelization 2000, a group dedicated to Catholic Church renewal.

-- A Polish priest resident in the "Light-Life" movement in Germany, who will return to assist the parish in January 2009.

-- A Polish deacon-in-training of the "Light-Life" movement.

-- A Belarusian woman with a music vocation, also resident in the "Light-Life" movement, who will also return in January 2009.

-- Hana, a Slovakian theologian, who has already visited the parish several times. Hana's doctoral thesis on the evangelization of Turkmenistan has been published in Slovakia.

EVANGELIZATION WEEK SUCCESSFUL, WITH MANY ATTENDEES

13. (C) Approximately 40 and more people attended the American priest's talks and preaching, held throughout the weekend and weekdays. At least 60 people (as many as half were not baptized Catholics) -- spilling out into the anteroom -- attended evening masses lasting almost two hours.

From all accounts, the meetings were overwhelmingly successful, with most regular parishioners taking part in the meetings during the day or in the evening. Another Polish priest will come in December 2008 to assist at the parish. Father Andrzej and Father Thomas have been asking their order, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, for additional priests for six years. Father Andrzej claimed that this

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evangelization week is not part of any concerted drive to bring additional members into the parish. He just wanted help while Father Thomas is away in Poland.

NOT WAITING FOR PEOPLE TO COME TO CHURCH, BUT ACTIVELY VISITING VILLAGES

14. (C) Father Andrzej and above-listed group of visitors traveled November 19 to the village of Arzuv outside of Ashgabat. Father Andrzej explained that this was not a unique visit -- he typically visits on a weekly basis the poor of this village -- which he says has huge drug abuse problems -- in his vehicle (with clearly displayed diplomatic plates). The American priest said that they met with a woman with thirteen children. He showed a photo of an open gas flame, which the woman explained her family uses for fire because gas is free, whereas they would have to purchase matches. Five of her children are in jail and several are dead. According to Raya, the parish's first convert, four of these villagers attend mass, with two of them preparing for Catholic baptism. Father Andrzej says that the government does not object to his outreach in the villages because of the Vatican Embassy's diplomatic status. (NOTE: It is surprising that Father Andrzej has never been chastised by government representatives about this, since local authorities regularly bar Turkmen Protestant groups from such activity. His diplomatic status may give him some protection. However, authorities become easily concerned about "unauthorized" religious activity, even the charitable kind, and are suspicious of anything that could be viewed as proselytizing ethnic Turkmen. END NOTE.)

BEST HOPE FOR REGISTRATION: A BOY FROM TURKMENBASHY

15. (C) Under the current religion law, religious organizations operating in Turkmenistan must be headed by local, who is a citizen of Turkmenistan (reftel). The "Transfiguration of Our Lord" parish is able to operate relatively freely due in part to the Apostolic Nunciature's status as a diplomatic mission. Anton Litvinov, a 19-year-old native of Turkmenbashi, who has been studying philosophy at the Diocese of Kyiv's Main Theological Seminary for three years, may be the Catholic Church's best hope for registration. If Litvinov decides to become a priest, the

earliest he could return to Ashgabat is 2016. However, even if he decides to study for the priesthood, there is still no guarantee that he will return to Ashgabat, as the decision of where young priests go is up to the head of the order. In addition to Litvinov, two young women have entered the monastery in Poland -- one of them is the daughter of Raya, the parish's first convert mentioned above.

16. (C) COMMENT: Father Andrzej's weekly forays into Arzuv are probably attracting more attention from the authorities than he thinks, especially because, as Raya noted, the people in this village know Father Andrzej well and come out of their homes when they see him arriving in his vehicle. In fact, it could jeopardize future attempts at registration. Regarding Litvinov, if he does return once he ends his studies, doors could well open for the church's registration -- after all these years. END COMMENT.

MILES